DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 890 PS 028 204

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TITLE Discovering Reggio Emilia: Building Connections between Learning and Art.
PUB DATE 1999-12-08
NOTE 23p.; Paper prepared for EDE 705 Project Seminar with Dr. Abigail S. McNamee, Fall 1999.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art Education; *Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; Program Descriptions; *Reggio Emilia Approach; Student Centered Curriculum; Student Projects
IDENTIFIERS Italy (Reggio Emilia)

ABSTRACT

Noting that the approach to early childhood education in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy incorporates art as a learning tool, this paper describes the Reggio Emilia approach and discusses ways for American educators to apply the philosophies of the Reggio Emilia schools. The paper describes the founding of the schools in Reggio Emilia, by Loris Malaguzzi, and summarizes the basis for the approach. Art is described as the gateway to all learning processes; the use of art materials in the Reggio Emilia schools is also detailed. The following elements are then described as important to the success of the approach: (1) emphasis on project work; (2) importance of classroom environment; (3) importance of art as serious work; (4) providing a variety of materials; (5) philosophy of creativity; (6) the adult-child relationship; (7) teacher/staff support systems; and (8) evidence of learning through art. The paper next describes the integration of the Reggio Emilia approach to incorporate each of the above elements in an art program for kindergarten through fifth grade in a public school in the Bronx, New York. The paper concludes by noting that there are many ideas that may be taken from the schools of Reggio Emilia. (Contains 16 references.) (KB)

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ED 456 890

ARTICLE FOR EDE 705 PROJECT SEMINAR WITH DR. ABIGAIL S. MCNAMEE FALL 1999 DISCOVERING REGGIO EMILIA, BUILDING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LEARNING AND ART BY;

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DISCOVERING REGGIO EMILIA

BUILDING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LEARNING AND ART

BY MELINA C. SASSALOS

ABSTRACT

American Educators of today are frequently caught up in a system of education which requires them to follow stringent sets of standards that students must meet. In the quest for higher scores on math and reading examinations, somehow the importance of the arts has been lessened and diminished. It has been shown that art is one of the most important and natural ways for children to express themselves. Perhaps even more important is the role of art as a learning tool in the early childhood years. In the city of Reggio Emilia in Italy, there are schools which follow a philosophy of integrating art into their educational programs, providing meaningful learning experiences for higher level thinking. The Reggio Emilia approach allows children to explore the world around them and learn about themselves through project work and documentation. The best way for American Educators to apply the philosophies of the Reggio Emilia schools would be to learn more about this exciting program. This paper is designed to enlighten those who do not know about the program, and help them gain a better understanding of the important role art plays in the psychological and intellectual development of children.

INTRODUCTION

I first heard the words Reggio Emilia when I showed my colleagues photographs of my classroom and the projects I did with my students, and described my methods for teaching art. My art studio is very spacious and bright and has centers for reading, creative writing, painting, claywork, collage and drawing. Student artwork hangs from the ceiling like bright banners and is prominently displayed "gallery style" on bulletin boards that

surround the classroom. There are areas for materials and art media in bright, colorful containers for easy access by the students in my art classes. There is a wide variety of materials available to students. When I introduce projects, students are encouraged to go to the center they feel most comfortable in, and they express themselves in the way they like. I use a thematic approach to teaching art, introducing topics such as Egyptian, Greek and Roman art, feelings, multiculturalism and famous artists. I provide the students with the resources they need to create, such as photographs, objects to study and feel, and books for research. Students work in groups or in tears, discussing their projects as they go along.

I was surprised to hear that my methods for teaching were so similar to those that are in effect in the preschools of a small town in Northern Italy known as Reggio Emilia. Upon hearing this, I knew that I had to find out more about this program and discover Reggio Emilia for myself.

THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH-HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

In a town known as Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy, one may visit preschools and view artworks and writings of extraordinary beauty and complexity. What makes the Reggio Emilia method of teaching so unique? What are the approaches and techniques that educators in these schoold utilize to bring out the hidden talents in their students as well as providing for great

opportunity for learning, socialization and language acquisition? Upon looking deeper into the methods and origins of this approach, one can truly begin to discover Reggio Emilia.

Founded by Loris Malaguzzi, Reggio Emilia is a collection of schools for young children in which each child's intellectual, emotional, social and moral potentials are carefully cultivated and guided (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 19993, p.x). The basis for the Reggio Emilia approach centers on eight main ideas as summarized by Dr. Rebecca Isbell. There is first a focus on the child as an individual, and the understanding that all children have potential, can construct their own meaning and are capable. There is a sense of community and system - family, children teachers, parents and community are interractive and work together. There is a great interest in the environment - schools and classrooms are beautiful places. Collaboration by teachers, teams, partners and children sharing in projects are of great importance. Time in the Reggio Emilia classroom is not set by the clock, there is a great respect for children's pace. Emergent curriculum and projects are child centered, following their own interests, allowing children to return again and again to add new insights. Environmental stimulation encourages activity involvement, discovering and the use of a wide variety of media. Finally, documentation plays an important part in future learning. All of these elements come together to create an extremely effective educational program (Isbell, 1999, p.1).

In the Reggio Emilia method of teaching, art is considered serious work (Seefeldt, 1995, p.39). One of the main points

of emphasis is on art and the role of art as the gateway to all learning processes. Children's artwork is displayed prominently throughout the Reggio Emilia schools and is usually brilliantly colored, intricate and far advanced for children of such a young age group. Art is viewed as having much to do with children's thoughts and emotions (p.40). In understanding that art is an expression of feeling, experience, thought and idea, teachers have to first encourage feeling, thinking and experiencing. Children need sufficient experiential and psychological motivation (p.40). To motivate students, teachers create meaningful experiences to help children reflect, think and ponder - children are then stimulated to related thinking through provacative questions and interactive conversations (p.40). Artworks children create depict community, family situations, imaginary worlds, natural environments and friendships. Artworks are creative reactions to the child's experiences and imaginative ways of thinking.

Children are encouraged to experiment with and use all kinds of materials to get their visions across, in turn, children are never bored, always excited about the creative process and eager to create and discuss their works of art amongst their peers and with adults. Student's works are prominently displayed throughout the school. Much of the art is displayed in cases as they would be in a museum, displays are carefully considered, labeled and carried out (Seefeldt, p.42).

In creating art, children are not confined to viewing "models" of finished art - there is no wrong or right way to

create art, in this method the art the child creates is always right for that child. Teachers do not put up models of what children's end results should be, they encourage the children to use their imaginations (p.43).

One interesting aspect of the Reggio Emilia method is the use of symbolic language. Artworks created in the Reggio program are considered "symbolic representations" rather than merely "art" (New, 1990, p.6). Children utilize the process of making art and the utilization of art materials to make sense of their world.

The following are descriptions of various elements that are important to the success of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

A Focus On Project Work in Reggio Emilia Programs:

There is a great emphasis on project work. Children work together and share their ideas and thoughts on particular themes and topics such as nature studies and neighborhood observations. Students sketch and construct meanings for their artworks, discussing outcomes and end results with their peers. The resulting works of art are highly detailed and complex. The children are able to give descriptions of their works and their reasons for creating it. Children come to understand and know their topics in depth and can discuss in great lengths the knowledge they gain from the project work they produce. In project work there is an emphasis on graphic skills and creativity (1990, pp. 7-8). The projects the students engage in are examples of students engaging in meaningful work. Through experiencing these

students gain an understanding of the world around them (1990, p.10). Another value of project work is that extended studies of particular phenomena undertaken in project work give children an early experience of knowing and understanding a topic in depth. This can be highly rewarding for children (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1993, p.23).

Importance Of Classroom Environment In Reggio Emilia Programs:

Classroom environment in Reggio Emilia schools is of great importance. It is an exciting place of exploration. It is tailor made to support the work that goes on in terms of projects. In Italy, the environment which is the main place of work is called the "atelier" which is a workshop. It contains a wide variety of resources and materials and is spacious and bright. In the atelier children are able to explore with paint, flour, clay and much more (1993, p.144). In the smaller "mini-atelier" children also explore the potentials and properties of clay, paper and wire. Children carry out many explorations and projects in both rooms (1993, p.145).

After the daily morning meeting when children have decided what they are going to do, they find that the necessary supplies and tools are already set up on tables, light tables and easels. Everything is in full view, easy to reach and displayed in transparent containers (p.145). Walls serve as areas for documentation of project work both in progress and completed. This helps to make parents, teachers and visitors aware of what is ging on

on in the school. The aesthetically beautiful environments in Reggio Emilia schools are impressive, but they are conceptually connected to the image of the child (Bredekamp, November 1993, p.14). The environment is an integral part of the process of creation. It both stimulates and supports creativity. The atelier is a space rich in materials, tools and people with professional competences. It is a place where children's different languages can be explored by themselves and their teachers in a favorable and peaceful atmosphere (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1993, p.68). It is a place of provocation (1993, p.67).

The Importance Of Art As Serious Work In The Reggio Emilia Program:

The art that children produce has purpose and meaning. Because students discuss their works and explore the works of their peers, art becomes important and meaningful rather than merely decorative objects (1993, p.27). It is a highly reguarded belief in the Reggio program that art is the gateway to further learning. In Reggio Emilia schools, art is thought of as a language, another way to communicate ideas, feelings and emotions (Seefeldt, 1995, p.39). Visual and graphic languages provide a way of exploring and expressing understandings of a world easily available to most preschoolers. The visual arts are integrated into the work as additional languages available to young children not yet competent in writing and reading (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1993, p.27). In Reggio schools, art is not frivolous, it is an extension of observations and reflectons, and opens the

gateway to further learning and contemplations on the part of the students.

Providing A Variety Of Materials For Students In The Reggio Emilia Programs:

In Reggio Emilia schools a wide variety and range of art media and materials are provided for the students on a daily basis in each workroom. These materials serve to extend the ideas of art as serious work. Students are never limited to painting and drawing materials, but are provided with clay, collage materials, pastels, paints and charcoals. Children are free to choose the materials they would like to use to express themselves. They use these materials to create realistic or imaginary works of art. Along with the provision of materials comes time to develop skills in using them. Students are taught new and exciting ways to use materials and different ways to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings (1993, p.42). The materials so freely provided extend students creativity in that they allow children to explore and experiment.

Philosophy Of Creativity In Reggio Emilia Programs:

In Reggio schools, creativity is seen as something likely to emerge from daily experience. As expressed by Loris Malaguzzi in The Hundred Languages Of Children (1993, p.71), creativity is viewed as a way of thinking, knowing and making choices. It emer-

ges from multiple experiences along with the development of personal resources. Creativity is expressed through "cognitive, affective and imaginative" processes. These come together to support skills for predicting and arriving at unexpected solutions. Interpersonal exchange, working out conflicts and sharing of ideas and actions are decisive elements. When adults are less tied to prescriptive methods and stand as observers and interpreters, creativity flourishes. Creativity is more visible when adults are less tied to prescriptive methods and stand as observers and interpreters, creativity flourishes. Creativity is more visible when adults are more attentive to the cognitive processes of the childrenrather than the results of doing and understanding. Teachers must understand that expressive activities have both "multiplying and unifying possibilities, therefore favoring friendly exchanges with imagination and fantasy. Creativity requires that the school of knowing finds connection with the school of expressing (1993, p.71).

The Adult-Child Relationship in Reggio Emilia Programs:

Teachers and children in Reggio Emilia schools relate to eachother (1993, p.155). The role of the teacher is described as being: "partner, nurturer and guide" (1993, p.155). Teachers are there to encourage their students, introduce projects in an interesting manner and guide students towards deriving deeper meanings. Reggio Emilia schools are interested in providing an education based on interrelationships. The goal is to build

an amiable school where children, teachers and family feel at home and interract comfortably with one another (1993, p.58). Parental involvement is of great importance. Parents are urged to be a part of their children's lives. Parents stay in scool with their children for the first few weeks that their children are in school until the child is comfortable on his or her own (New, 1990, p.5). Teachers and parents collaborate with children on journals or albums which are filled with children's work, photographs and records. This provides documentation of children's progress throughout the years (1990, p.5). These notebooks provide into who the child is as an individual and brings families closer, involving them actively in their children's lives.

Teachers are encouraged to be neutral observers (Seefeldt, 1990, p.43). They are usually surprised with the results of children's work as they stand aside and watch children create. But teachers must also know when to intervene. Children and teachers examine topics together which allows for experiences that are exciting and enlightening for teachers and students. Teachers listen to students talk about their art and allow them to resolve problems on their own. Teachers do not underestimate children's capacities for learning and they realize that children have the capacity to depict these understandings through a variety of art forms. Children and teachers always discuss the end results of projects.

Teacher/Staff Support Systems In Reggio Emilia Programs:

Teachers and staff work together and share classroom experiences with one another in frequent meetings. These meetings provide opportunities for staff to learn about their students and give each other ideas for future projects. Working together in the classroom environment are the Atelierista and the Pedogogista. The Atelierista is a trained art educator in charge of the atelier or art studio/workroom, she supports the teachers in curriculum development and documentation (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1993, p.313). The role of the Atelierista is to coordinate symbolic language stimulation and expansion for and between adults (phillips, November 1993, p.18). The Pedogogista acts as a consultant, resource person and coordinator to several schools and centers. Both of these educators work together and are considered important to the success of the school.

Evidence Of Learning Through Art in The Reggio Emilia Programs:

The use of art as a stepping stone for future learning is evident in some of the projects described in the Book The Hundred Languages Of Children. One example given was a study of puddles. In this project, students went outside and actually experienced a puddle. Children looked at their reflectionsand described excitedly what they saw. Their teachers then placed mirrors on the ground as children walked, stood and even did handstands over the mirrors. Here they also looked at their reflections. Back in class, students drew trees and pictures, cutting out their

pictures and placing them near small mirrors so that their artworks could be reflected in the mirrors. Students observed and recorded what they saw. Their drawings reflected a greater understanding of what they saw and described. Students began to understand the effects of light on water, what reflections were and how blocking the light can create shadows and sometimes make reflections in water dissappear. (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, pp.128-131).

Other projects that followed a similar approach included leaf drawings, clay paintings and self portraits. All projects began with observation and "experiencing", questioning, discussing and the ultimate creation of actual works of art. In each project, because students actually experienced their subject matter they were able to grasp deeper meaning from what they created with their art materials.

INTEGRATION OF A REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH IN A BRONX SCHOOL

Upon researching the philosophies and elements that make Reggio Emilia schools so successful in terms of learning through art, I decided to build on my own art program at P.S./M.S. 3- The Raul Julia School in the Bronx. As I had already been incorporating some of the ideas of the Reggio approach such as freedom of expression, provision of materials, group work, discussion and documentation, it did not seem that there would be a drastic or difficult transition. My students who range

range from ages 4-10(kindergarten through the fifth grades), were already used to my techniques. The challenge was to alter some of my approaches slightly in order to integrate some of the higher level thinking skills so important to the Reggio Emilia approach.

A Focus On Project Work At P.S./M.S. 3:

I had already been working on projects with themes with my students. I decided to follow through with the Reggio methods of project work through experiencing. One project I began with my first and second graders had to do with our neighborhood. Students were taken on a neighborhood walk which involved both the park and merchant's areas. Students brought sketch pads and drawing materials and sketched what they saw in detail, each focusing on something they really enjoyed looking at such as the interior of the Arthur Avenue market, the fish store or the playground in the park. Back at the art studio, students shared their drawings with one another and found that some were interested in the same scenes. Students created their own project groups based on who drew the park, the market etc. Over the next week we again visited the neighborhood areas the children had drawn, students asked the people in the neighborhood questions, and with my assistance jotted down what they learned in little journals. In class students again discussed what they experienced. As I listened to children talk amongst themselves, I heard them

talking about the "magical eels" in front of the fish store, or the "fruits that looked like rainbows" in the Arthur Avenue market. Students then chose the art media they wanted to work with and began to create art based on their sketches. Some groups made sculptures, others worked with clay, still others made paintings and murals. As children worked, I took photographs to document the experience. when the projects were done, the students worked together to write descriptive captions near their works. At the end of the experience, each group shared their artwork with the class proudly. What was learned by the students who created the works of art was that there are many things to experience in the neighborhood, there are many things going on that aren't always evident to children unless they explore them for themselves. The resulting artworks were both beautiful and intricate and the student's descriptions were very eloquent. Everyone who saw the display, which in keeping with the Reggio approach was put up in a gallery fashion, was quite impressed.

I utilized this project with some of the older students as well and was very surprised by the level of detail and the discussions had by the groups.

A Change In The Classroom Environment at P.S./M.S. 3:

In the art studio at P.S./M.S. 3 where I teach art, there is a wide variety of space. I had already put up separate areas for different activities. Now, I wanted to separate the room into

an Atelier and a mini-atelier. These spaces would be labeled and utilized for the exploration of materials through project work. In the mini-atelier, I placed materials for sculpture such as wire,clay, wood and recyclable materials such as cans and cardboard. In the atelier, I placed all other art materials. I explained to the students that the words meant workshop and little-workshop and they told me they felt like "real artists", like Michelangelo. The students liked the change in set up. All materials and tools were ready for use at the start of each class and students were able to retrieve whatever materials they needed for their projects. Unneccessary clutter was cleared from the window areas so that more light could get in and student displays were made to look more professional.

Making Art Serious Work At P.S./M.S. 3:

In the beginning, students saw art as "just something fun to do", through the project work and documentation, students began to understand how important art really is to learning. As students worked together, discussing and creating, they were actually learning about themselves, their peers and the world around them, they began to remember things they had experienced through the projects they were engaged in and art became serious work to them. Students wanted to talk about things they learned and felt a sense of pride in their accomplishments. Students also began having more in-depth conversations about their observations.

Changes In Adult Child Relationships At P.S/M.S. 3:

Whereas I was before more involved in the actual teaching of the students. Through learning about the Reggio Emilia approach I became more of a gentle guide. I allowed students to draw their ownconclusions about what was being experienced, being there for them if they needed a little push here and there. I also learned how to question or prepare questions that would spark creative thinking. I began to involve parents more in the art program, encouraging them to keep journals that we would fill with artwork and writings to show their child's progress. Parents enjoyed seeing the "professional displays" and felt good that their children's work was seen as so important. Parents were also active in our neighborhood walks and observations.

Teacher/Staff support system changes at P.S./M.S. 3:

In keeping with the ideas taken from the Reggio Emilia approach, I began to get more of the staff involved in the art program at P.S./M.S. 3. I worked with classroom teachers to extend written work and creative writings such as poetry. I discussed children's progress with classroom teachers as well. The administration became more involved in supporting our art program by helping to provide the materials and resources needed to keep the art program running successfully. The librarian was also actively involved in helping the students in their research work.

Evidence of Learning Through Art at P.S./M.S. 3:

Learning through art has always been evident through my program at P.S./M.S.3. However with the integration of the ideas of the Reggio Emilia approach there seems to be a different kind of understanding evident in the works of my students. Students ask more questions and remember more about what they learned through their projects. They are more apathetic to the feelings of others. They are interested and eager and even more engaged. Experiencing helps students grasp concepts which would not be so easily remembered had they been "taught at" the students.

Students are more sensitive to detail in their drawings and have become interested in scientific diagrams as a resource for their plant and animal drawings. With time, I feel that even more evidence will be seen. Students have higher expectations for themselves and their peers and at the same time there is a more relaxed-stress free attitude in the art studio. Children are working and learning at their own pace.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are many ideas that may taken from the schools of Reggio Emilia. When given the opportunity to express themselves, children are truly capable of creating meaningful works at very young ages. The potential for learning should not be underestimated just because a child may seem too young or unable to write. Through the provision of a wide variety of materials, resources and opportunities to explore, children can express themselves through art. In turn they gain social skills, a sensitivity to the world around them and even a better understanding of themselves. Project work strengthens the connections between art and learning fostered by this program. Through projects, children expand on their ideas and feed off the ideas and energies of their peers. The fact that teachers act as gentle guides, never interfering, but helping children along, is important. Here the students become responsible for what they learn at their own pace, making natural, not forced progressions. With documentation in albums, notebooks and displays, parents and teachers may observe these progressions and the improvement of student work through time. Documentation also lets students know that their work is important to others, therefore enhancing their sense of pride in themselves. The Reggio Emilia program truly is a fascinating approach to early childhood education,it is one in which the child is respected as an individual with a great deal of potential for learning. Through the Reggio Emilia program, through art, projects and discussions, children grow

into young adults who have deeper understandings of the world around them and are able to express themselves in a meaningful way.

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